The BRONZE BELL

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SYNOPSIS.

David Amber, starting for a duck-shooting visit with his friend, Quain, comes upon a young lady equestrian who has been dismounted by her horse becoming frightened at the sudden appearance in the road of a burly Hindu. He declares he is Mohart Lal Chatterji, "The appointed mouthpiece of the Bell," addresses Amber as a man of high rank and presses a mysterious little bronze box, "The Voice," into his hand, disappears in the wood. The girl calls Amber by name. She in turn addresses her as Miss Sophie Farrell, daughter of Col. Farrell of the British diplomatic service in India and visiting the Quains. Several nights later the Quain home is burglarized and the bronze box stolen. Amber and Quain go hunting on an island and become lost and Amber is left marooned. He wanders about, finally reaches a cabin and recognizes as its occupant an old friend named Rutton, whom he last met in Kingsland, and who appears to be in hiding. When Miss Farrell is mentioned Rutton is strangely agitated. Chatterji appears and summons Rutton to a meeting of a mysterious body. Rutton seizes a revolver and dashes after Chatterji. He returns wildly excited, says he has killed the Hindu, takes poison, and when dying asks Amber to go to India on a mysterious errand. Amber decides to leave at once for India. On the way he sends a letter to Mr. Labertouche, a scientific friend in Calcutta, by a quicker route. Upon arriving he finds a note awaiting him. It directs Amber to meet his friend at a certain place. The latter tells him he knows his mission is to get Miss Farrell out of the country. Amber attempts to dispose of the Token to a money-lender, is mistaken for Rutton and barely escapes being mobbed. A message from Labertouche causes him to start for Darjeeling.

CHAPTER XI. (Continued.)

"Ah, that Voice!" cried Amber in exasperation. "I grow weary of the word, Ram Nath."

"That may well be," returned the man, imperturbable. "None the less it were well for you to have a care how you fondle the revolver in your pocket, sahib. Should it by chance go off and the bullet find lodgment in your tonga-wallah, you are like to hear more of that Voice, and from less friendly lips."

"I think you have eyes in the back of your head, Ram Nath." Amber withdrew his hand from his coat-pocket and laughed shortly as he spoke.

"There is a saying in this country, sahib, that even the stones in the desert have ears to hear and eyes to see and tongues withal to tell what they have seen and heard."

"Ah-h! . . . That is a wise saying, Ram Nath."

"There be those I could name who would do well to lay that saying to heart, sahib."

"You are right, indeed. . . . Now if there be aught of truth in that saying, and if one were unwisely to speak a certain name, even here—"

"The echo of that name might be heard beyond the threshold of a certain Gateway, sahib."

Amber grunted and said no more, contented now with the assurance that he was in truth in touch with Labertouche, that this Ram Nath was an employee of the I. S. S. The wink was now explained away with all the rest of the tonga-wallah's churlishness.

As the tonga swiftly lessened the distance, his gaze, penetrating the thinning folds, discerned the contours of a cotton-wain drawn by twin stunted bullocks, patient noses to the ground, tails a-switch. Beside his cattle the driver plodded, goad in hand, a naked sword upon his hip.

Deliberately enough the carter swerved his beasts aside to make way for the tonga, lest by undue haste he should make himself seem other than what he was—a free man and a Rajput. But when his fierce, hawk-like eyes encountered those of the dak traveler, his attitude changed curiously and completely. Recognition and reverence fought with surprise in his expression, and as Ram Nath swung the tonga past the man salaamed profoundly. His voice, as he rose, came after them, resonant and clear:

"Hail, thou Chosen of the Gateway! Hail!"

Amber neither turned to look nor replied. But his frown deepened. The incident passed into his history, marked only by the terse comment it adduced from Ram Nath—words which were flung curtly over the tonga-wallah's shoulder: "Eyes to see and ears to hear and a tongue withal . . . sahib!"

The Virginian said nothing. But it was in his mind that he had indeed thrust his head into the lion's mouth by thus adventuring into the territory which every instinct of caution and common-sense proclaimed taboo to him—the erstwhile kingdom of the Maharana Har Dyal Rutton.

CHAPTER XII.

The Long Day.

One travels dak by relays casually disposed along the route at the whim of the native contractor. Between Badshah Junction and Kuttarpur there were ten stages, of which the conclusion of the first was at hand—Amber having all but abandoned belief in its existence.

Slamming recklessly down the bed of an ancient water course, the tonga spun suddenly upon one wheel round a shoulder of the banks and dashed out upon a rolling plain, across which the trail snaked to other farther hills that lay dim and low, a wavy line of blue, upon the horizon—the hills in whose heart Kuttarpur itself lay concealed. And, by the roadside, in a compound fenced with camel-thorn, sat an aged and indigent dak-bungalow, marking the end of the first stage, the beginning of the second.

Ram Nath reined in with a flourish and lifted a raucous voice, hailing the syce, while Amber, painfully disengaging his cramped limbs, climbed down and stumbled toward the veranda. The abrupt transition from violent and erratic motion to a solid and substantial footing affected him unpleasantly, and with an undeniable qualm; the earth seemed to rock and flow beneath him as if under the influence of an antic earthquake. He was for some seconds occupied with the problem of regaining his poise, and it was not until he heard an Englishwoman's voice uplifted in accents of anger, that he remembered the other wayfarer with whom he was to share his tonga, or associated with the white-clad figure in the dark doorway of the bungalow with anything but the khansamah, coming to greet and cheat the chance-brought guest.

"Where is that tonga-wallah who deserted me here last night?" the woman was demanding of Ram Nath, too preoccupied with her resentment to have eyes for the other traveler, who at sight of her had stopped and removed his pith helmet and stood staring as if he had come from a land in which there were no women. "Where," she continued, with an imperative stamp of a daintily-shod foot, "is that wretched tonga-wallah?"

"Sahiba," protested Ram Nath, with a great show of deference, "how should I know? Belike he is in Badshah Junction, whither he returned very late last night, being travel-worn and weary, and where I left him, being sent with this excellent tonga to take his place."

"You were? And why have I been detained here, alone and unprotected, this long night? Simply because that other tonga-wallah was a fool, am I to be imposed upon in this fashion?"

"What am I," whimpered Ram Nath, "to endure the wrath of the sahiba for a fault that is none of mine?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the girl, turning to Amber, "but it is very annoying." She looked him over, first with abstraction, then with a puzzled gathering of her brows, for he was far from her thoughts—the last person she would have expected to meet in that place, and very effectually disguised in dust and dirt besides. "The tire came off the wheel just as we got here, late yesterday evening, and in trying, or pretending to try, to fit it on again, that block-head of a tonga-wallah hammered the rim with a rock as big as his head and naturally smashed it to kindling-wood. Then, before I could stop him, he flung himself on the back of a pony and went away, saying that it was the will of God that he should return to Badshah for a better tonga. Since when I have had for company one stable-scye, one deaf-and-dumb patriarch of a khansamah and . . . the usual dak-bungalow discomforts—insects, bad food, and a terrible fear of dacoits."

"I am so sorry, Miss Farrell," Amber put in. "If I had only been here . . ."

The girl gave a little gasp and sat down abruptly in one of the veranda chairs, thereby threatening it with instant demolition and herself with a bad spill; for the chair was feeble with the burden of its many years, and she was a quite substantial young person. Indeed, so loudly did it croak a protest and a warning that she immediately arose in alarm.

"Mr. Amber!" she said; and, "Well . . . !"

"You'll forgive me the surprise?" he begged, going up on the veranda to her. "I myself had no hope of finding you here."

"But," she protested, with a pretty flush of color—"but I left you in the States such a little while ago!"

"Yes?" he said gravely. "It seems so long to me. . . . And when you had gone, Long Island was a very lonely place indeed," he added, with calculated impudence.

Her color deepened and she sought another chair, seating herself with gingerly decision. "I'm sure you don't mean me to assume that you've followed me half round the world?"

"Why not?" He brought another chair to face her. "Besides, I haven't seen anything of . . . India for a good many years."

"Mr. Amber!"

"Ma'am?" he countered with affected humility.

"You're spoiling it all. I was so glad to see you—I'd have been glad to see any white man, of course—"

"Much obliged, I'm sure."

"And now you're actually flirting with me—or pretending to."

"I'm not," he declared soberly. "As a matter of solemn fact, I had to come to India."

"You had to?"

"On a matter of serious business. Please don't ask me what, just yet; but it's very serious, to my way of thinking. This happy incident—I count myself a very happy man to have been so fortunate—only makes my errand the more pleasant."

She regarded him intently, chin in hand, her brown eyes sedate with speculation, for some time. "I believe you've been speaking in parables," she asserted, at length. "If I'm unjust, bear with me; appearances are against you. There isn't any reason I know of why you should tell me what brought you here—"

"There's every reason, in point of fact, Miss Farrell; only . . . I can't explain just now."

"Very well," she agreed briskly; "let's be content with that. I am glad to see you again, truly; and—we're to travel on to Kuttarpur in the same tonga?"

"If you'll permit—"

"After what I've endured, this awful night, I wouldn't willingly let you out of my sight."

"Or any other white man?"

She laughed, pleased. "I presume you're wondering what I'm doing here?"

"You were to join your father in Darjeeling, I believe?" he countered, cautious.

"But I found he'd been transferred unexpectedly to Kuttarpur. So, of course, I had to follow. I telegraphed him day before yesterday when I was to arrive at Badshah Junction, and naturally expected he'd come in person or have some one meet me, but I presume the message must have gone astray. At all events there was no one there for me and I had to come on alone. It's hardly been a pleasant experience; that incompetent tonga-wallah behaved precisely as though he had deliberately made up his mind to delay me. . . . And the tonga's nearly ready; I must lock my kit-bag."

She went into the bungalow, leaving him thoughtful, for perhaps. . . . But the back of Ram Nath, as that worthy busied himself superintending the harnessing in of fresh ponies, conveyed to him no support of his half-credited hypothesis that this "accident" had been carefully planned by Labertouche for Amber's especial benefit.

The girl joined him on the veranda in due course, very demure and

"I Myself Had No Hope of Finding You Here."

sweet to look upon in her traveling dress of light pongee and her pith helmet, whose green underbrim and puggaree served very handsomely to set off her fair coloring. If she overlooked the adoration of his eyes, she was rather less than woman; for it was in them, plain to be seen for the looking. The khansamah followed her from the bungalow, staggering under the weight of her box and kit-bag, and with Ram Nath's surly assistance made them fast to the front seat, while Amber gave the girl his hand to help her to her place, and lifted himself to her side in a mute glow of ecstasy. Fate, he thought with reason, was most kind to him.

They rattled headlong from the compound, making for the distant hills of blue. Amber was seated with the woman who was to be his wife.

The second stage wore away without a dozen words passing between them; so also the third. The pauses were brief enough, the ponies being exchanged with gratifying dispatch. The tonga would pull up, Ram Nath would jump down . . . and in a brace of minutes or little more the vehicle would be en route again, Amber engaged with the infinite ramifications of this labryrinthal riddle of his, and the girl insensibly yielding to the need of sleep. She passed, at length, into sound unconsciousness.

She roused finally very much refreshed for the midday halt for rest and tiffin, which they passed at one of the conventional bungalows, in nothing particularly unlike its fellows unless it were that they enjoyed, before tiffin, the gorgeous luxury of plenty of clean water, cooled in porous earthen jars. Amber, overwhelmed by the discovery of this abundance, promptly went to the extreme of calling in the khansamah to sluice him down with jar after, and felt like himself for the first time in five days when, shaved and dressed, he returned to the common living room of the resthouse.

The girl kept him waiting but a little while. Lacking the attentions of an ayah, she had probably been unable to bathe so extensively as he, but eventually she appeared in an immeasurably more happy state of body and mind, calling up to him the simile, stronger than any other, of a tall, fair lily after a morning shower. And she was in a bewitching humor, one that ingenuously enough succeeded in entangling him more thoroughly than ever before in the web of her fascinations. Over an execrable curry of stringy fowl and questionable rice, eked out with tea and tinned delicacies of their own, their chatter, at the beginning sufficiently gay and inconsequent, drifted by imperceptible and unsuspected gradations perilously close to the shoals of intimacy. And subsequently, when they had packed themselves back into the narrow tonga seat and again were being bounced and juggled breathlessly over shocking roads, the exchange of confidences continued with unabated interest.

For all the taint upon her pedigree, she proved herself to Amber at heart a simple, lonely Englishwoman—a stranger in a sullen and suspicious land, desiring nothing better than to return to the England she had seen and learned to love, the England of ample lawns, of box-hedges, and lanes, of traveled highways, pavements and gaslights, of shops and theaters, of home and family ties . . .

But India she knew. "I sometimes fancy," she told him with the conscious laugh that deprecates a confessed superstition, "that I must have lived here in some past incarnation." She paused, but he did not speak. "Do you believe in reincarnation?" Again he had no answer for her, though temporarily he saw the daylight as darkness. "It's hard to live here for long and resist belief in it. . . . But as a matter of fact I seem to understand these people better than they're understood by most of my people. Don't you think it curious? Perhaps it's merely intuition—"

"That's the birthright of your sex," he said, rousing. "On the other hand, you have to remember that your father is one of a family that for generations has served the Empire. And your mother?"

"She, too, came of an Anglo-Indian family. Indeed, they met and courted here, though they were married in England. . . . So you think my insight into native character a sort of birthright—a sense inherited?"

"Perhaps—something of the sort."

"You may be right. We'll never know. At all events, I seem to have a more—more painful comprehension of the native than most of the English in this country have; I seem to feel, to sense their motives, their desires, aspirations, even sometimes their untranslatable thoughts. I believe I understand perfectly their feeling toward us, the governing race."

"Then," said Amber, "you know something his Highness the Viceroy himself would give his ears to be sure of."

"I know that; but I do."

"And that feeling is—?"

"Not love, Mr. Amber."

"Very much to the contrary—?"

"Very much," she affirmed with deep conviction.

"This 'Indian unrest' one reads of in the papers is not mere gossip, then?"

"Anything but that; it's the hidden fire stirring within the volcano we told ourselves was dead. The quiet of the last 50 years has been not content but slumber; deep down there has always been the fire, slow, deadly, smoldering beneath the ashes. The Mutiny still lives in spirit; some day it will break out afresh. You must believe me—I know."

Night overtook the tonga when it was close upon Kuttarpur, swooping down upon the world like a blanket of darkness, at the moment that the final relay of ponies was being hitched in.

With fresh ponies the tonga took the road with a wild initial rush soon to be moderated, when it began to climb the last steep grade to the pass that gives access to Kuttarpur from the south. For an hour the road toiled up and ever upward; steep cliffs of rock crowded it, threatening to push it over into black abysses, or to choke it off between towering, formidable walls. It swerved suddenly into a broad, clear space. The tonga paused. Voluntarily Ram Nath spoke for almost the first time since morning.

"Kuttarpur," he said, with a wave of his whip.

Aloof, austere and haughty, the City of Swords sits in the mouth of a ravine so narrow that a wall no more than 100 yards in length is sufficient to seal its southerly approach. Beneath this wall, to one side of the city gate, a river flows from the lake that is Kuttarpur's chiefest beauty.

Northwards the palace of Khandawar's kings stands, exquisite, rare, and marvellous, unlike any other building in the world. White, all white, from the lake that washes its lowest walls to the crenellated rim of its highest roof, it sweeps upward in breath-taking steps and wide terraces to the crest of the western hill, into which it burrows, from which it springs; a vast enigma propounded in white marble without a note of color save where the foliage of a hidden garden peeps over the edge of a jealous screen—a hundred imposing mansions merged into one monstrous and imperial maze.

But for a moment were they permitted to gaze in wonderment; Ram Nath had little patience. When he chose to, he applied his whip, and the ponies stretched out, the tonga plunging on their heels down the steep hillside, like an ungoverned, ungovernable thing, maddened. Within a quarter of an hour they were careering through the city of tents on the parked plain before the southern wall. In five minutes more they drew up at the main city gate to parley with the Quarter Guard.

Here they suffered an exasperating delay. It appeared that the gates were shut at sundown, in deference to custom immemorial. Between that hour and sunrise none were permitted to pass either in or out without the express sanction of the State. The commander of the guard instituted an impudent catechism, in response to which Ram Nath discovered the several identities and estates of his charges. The commander received the information with impartial equanimity and retired within the city to confer with his superiors. After some time a trooper was sent to advise the travelers that the tonga would be permitted to enter with the understanding that the unaccredited Englishman (meaning Amber) would consent to lodge for the night in no other spot than the State resthouse beyond the northern limits of the city.

Abruptly the peace of the night was shattered, and the hum of the encampment behind them with the roar of the city before them was dwarfed, by a dull and thunderous detonation of cannon from a terrace of the palace. The tonga ponies reared and plunged, Ram Nath mastering them with much difficulty. Sophia was startled, and Amber himself stirred uneasily on his perch.

"What now?" he grumbled. "You'd think we were visitors of state and had to be durbarred!"

Far up on the heights a second red flame stabbed the night, and again the thunder pealed. Thereafter gun after gun bellowed at imperative, stately intervals.

"Fifteen," Amber announced after a time. "Isn't this something extraordinary, Miss Farrell?"

"Perhaps," she suggested, "there's a native potentate arriving at the northern gate. They're very punctilious about their salutes, you know."

Another crash silenced her. Amber continued to count. "Twenty-one," he said when it seemed that there was to be no more cannonading. "Isn't that a royal salute?"

"Yes," said the girl; "four more guns than the Maharana of Khandawar himself is entitled to."

"How do you explain it?"

"I don't," she replied simply. "Can you?"

He was dumb. Could it be possible that this imperial greeting was intended for the man supposed to be the Maharana of Khandawar—Har Dyal Rutton? He glanced sharply at the girl, but her face was shadowed; and he believed she suspected nothing.

A great hush had fallen, replacing the rolling thunder of the state ordnance. Even the voice of the city seemed moderate, subdued. In silence the massive gates studded with sharp-toothed elephant-spikes swung open.

With a grunt, Ram Nath cracked his whiplash and the tonga sped into the city. Amber bent forward.

"What's the name of that gate, Ram Nath—if you happen to know?"

"That," said the tonga-wallah in a level voice, "is known as the Gateway of Swords, sahib." He added in his own good time: "But not the Gateway of Swords."

Amber failed to educe from him any satisfactory explanation of this cryptic utterance.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Onlooker

By WILBUR D. NESBIT

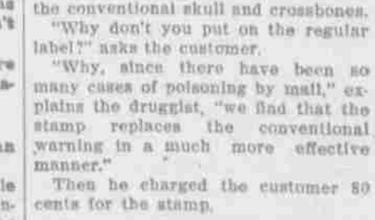
Song of the Asphalt Gang

I wukkin' hahd en I wukkin' long—
Sen' dem clock han's roun'.
I poundin' good en I poundin' strong—
Sen' dem clock han's round'.
Oh, bring dat stone en bring dat san',
En roll it hyah ter de wukkin' man,
En dis day's wuk all I can stan'—
Sen' dem clock han's round'.

I wuk las' week twell I got mah pay—
Sen' dem clock han's roun'.
I got mah li'l ol' dollah-er-day—
Sen' dem clock han's roun'.
I roll dem bones, an dey don't roll right,
I done th'ow monkeys en hab er fight,
But I gwine th'ow sebben termorrer night
Sen' dem clock han's roun'!

Oh, wuk like dis—htt ain' no fun—
Sen' dem clock han's round'.
But de money nice w'en I is done—
Sen' dem clock han's round'.
Oh, bring dat asphalt down de line,
En' roll her smoove twell she lookin' fine—
Termorrer night I rools fer mine—
Sen' dem clock han's roun'!

SEVERE.



"A man in Baltimore," says the individual with the paper, "is going to be married in jail two weeks before he is hung."

"And yet," growls the bald-headed man on the cracker barrel, "the constitution of the United States declares that no person shall be subjected to any cruel or unusual form of punishment."

Just So.

O, with what critic-eyes we view
And how we frown and look askance
At folk who do what we would do
If placed in the same circumstance.

Edison.

Mr. Thomas A. Edison says we sleep too much.

Mr. Edison invented the phonograph. Those who live next door to a phonograph which is addicted to "Alexander's Ragtime Band" will laugh raucously.

But Mr. Edison also invented the electric light. And you cannot, or need not, burn electric lights when you sleep.

It may be that Mr. Edison is talking business, and not philosophy.

He Read the Papers.

Carefully wrapping up the package of rat poison, the druggist sticks thereon a two-cent stamp instead of the conventional skull and crossbones.

"Why don't you put on the regular label?" asks the customer.

"Why, since there have been so many cases of poisoning by mail," explains the druggist, "we find that the stamp replaces the conventional warning in a much more effective manner."

Then he charged the customer 80 cents for the stamp.

Naturally.

"That son of a gun," says our wild and woolly friend during the melee in the Blue Goose saloon, "shoots too sudden."

"Of course," we comment from our coign of vantage beneath the table, "being a son of a gun, as you say, he would be quick on the trigger."

Whereat our wild and woolly friend gives vent to his regret that he has emptied his revolver and has no cartridges left to fire at us.

Stumped Him.

"But," objected the great editor, "I told you to draw me a cartoon applicable to the coal trust. Is this the best you can do?"

"What better do you want?" asked the cartoonist. "This represents the devil up a tree!"

Wilbur D. Nesbit.